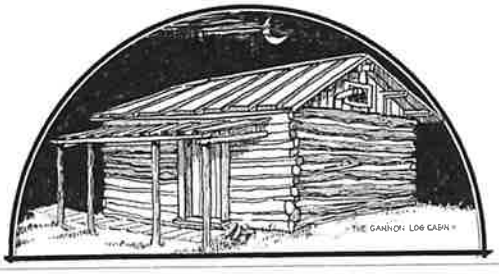
The McHenry County Historical Society's QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER



Tracer

Winter 2015

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Sampler Series

3 p.m. March 16- We Sang, We Danced: A Musical History of McHenry County." Join Mary Ellen Heelan, of Cary, as she recounts the fascinating, often mysterious, history of local dance halls and the musicians who performed in them. the period on piano and accordion.

7 p.m. March 30 – "Domestic Servants in the 19th Century." Speaker Erika Hoist, curator of the Edwards Place historical home in Springfield, talks about domestic servants and their role in the 1800s.

7 p.m. April 14 – "Man Who Knew Lincoln" The Historical Society is partnering with the McHenry County Civil War Roundtable to bring Abraham Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon (portrayed by Ron Halversen of the Kenosha Civil War Museum) to the museum.

3 p.m. April 28 -The Journey to Mollie's War: WACS and World War II" Speaker Cyndee Schaffer's mother served overseas in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) during World War II.

** Series tickets $35; members $30; individual programs $10. Partial funding from the Illinois Humanities Council.*

Bill Laskey still making music, walking to a different beat

By SUE RICHARDS

He is a jazz musician, Air Force veteran, teacher and award-winning band leader, professional photographer, father extraordinare and mentor to more young people than we can name. He became a pilot at age 80 and is dating the girls next door at age 91.

Who is this guy?

Once in awhile you come across somebody living a life so full, quite literally so *note*worthy that you feel compelled to stop and give him or her a high-five. Bill Laskey is one of those people.

He never stops using his innate gifts and hard work, coupled with experience and determination, to conquer the insurmountable.

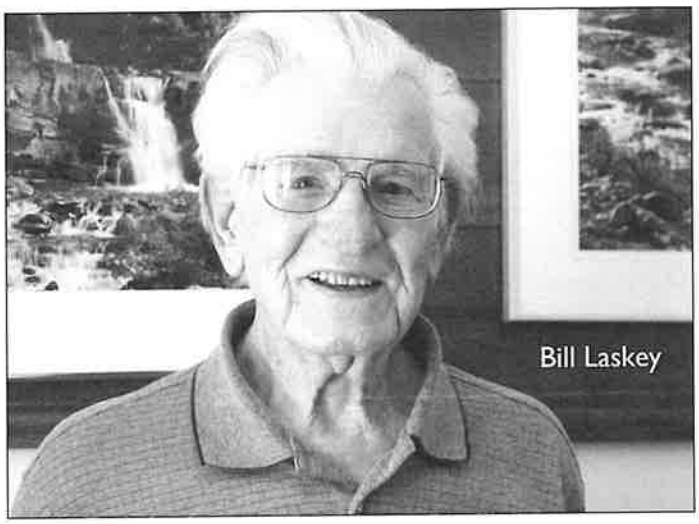
His parents probably never guessed that their youngest child, born in 1922, would rise from a helper at the family's South Side dime store to an acclaimed musician and teacher.

Bill insists he was nurtured on music in his mother's womb. His moxie and patriotism came from the times he lived through and his compassion was reinforced through raising a special-needs son. During the many years he led generations of marching band students in Crystal Lake, he was quick to share credit and was generous in his praise. Consider this open letter from the first "Drumbeat" magazine in 1974, directed at members of what then the Crystal Lake Community High School Marching Tiger Band:

"They were willing to accept on faith that all the time and hard work spent in learning a new style, memorizing music and all the extra practice times would be worth the results. By participating in such a fashion, a feeling of group unity and camaraderie – while present before – has been achieved to a high degree. ...At a time when young people are being accused of slacking off, taking the easy out, being concerned with material gains, these achievements deserve recognition."

So do you Mr. Laskey, so do you.

– Sue Richards
Tell Me a Story, Inc.


Bill Laskey

Name: Bill Laskey
Age: 91
Town where live now: Crystal Lake
Hometown: Chicago
Favorite movie: Not "Annie," which I just saw recently.
Favorite piece of music: It's hard to choose. I love the "Fanfare for the Common Man" and "Rites of Spring" by Stravinsky; all of the Beethoven's symphonies; a lot of the Mozart's symphonies; anything by Miles Davis or Charlie Parker.
Favorite time period of your life so far: The 10 years when I was doing the marching band because that rejuvenated my career. You get to almost the end of it, last 10 years and you're wondering why the hell you're doing this. A few times I was directing the band in a concert and thinking: What the hell am I doing here? I've had so many different hobbies – sailing, photography, motorcycling, stained glass, making model cars, collecting bigger cars. I've lost track of the number of cars I've had. My military experience was very beneficial to me because I got a lot of confidence.

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The Tracer is a quarterly publication carrying local history topics, news and information for members of the McHenry County Historical Society.

Our museum is located south of Route 176 and north of Route 20 at 6422 Main St., Union.

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An appointment is necessary to use the research library. Nonmembers pay a research fee. Copies are extra.

MUSEUM HOURS

(May 1 through Oct. 4)

1 to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and select Sundays

McHenry County Historical Society members enjoy free admission.

Our Mission

Providing the methods and means of presenting McHenry County history to enrich life.

[An Illinois Not-for-profit 501(C)3 Corporation]

WE APPRECIATE OUR MEMBERS.

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Previously, I didn't have much confidence in myself but I kept continually getting put in positions of responsibility and doing well in them and that gave me a lot of confidence for my future life. Besides, I just love life. I love living.

Future plans: My goal is to just stay alive. It's like that Woody Allen quote that goes something like this…"When it comes time to die, I'm not going to."

RICHARDS: Where did you grow up?

LASKEY: I lived in Chicago until my senior year in high school and then we moved out to Evergreen Park where my dad and one of my aunts started a dime store. My dad had hoped to be able to quit his job and just spend time in the dime store, but that never worked out. Then I went into the service. While I was in the service they sold the dime store, then a Woolworth's moved in right across he street from it. It was never very profitable.

We lived in Evergreen Park but people would get on the bus and drive into 63rd and Halsted just to save money on stuff. They didn't do a lot of shopping in Evergreen Park. If would have been better had my dad bought land in Evergreen Park because after the war hundreds of people moved out there.

RICHARDS: So what was your childhood like?

LASKEY: I was raised during the Depression. My dad worked for Armour and Co and my mother had a job, too. They both lost their jobs at the same time –laid off. And there was a lot of crying. We were living in a nice apartment but we had to move out of that and we ended up in a South Side apartment in the Englewood neighborhood. I never thought it was the Englewood neighborhood. I was recently surprised to find out that it was. We lived at 69th and Parnell on the South Side. The Englewood neighborhood extends to the 72 or 7300 [block]. Now it has a really bad reputation, but it was kind of nice when I was there.

As I say, I moved out to Evergreen Park. In my senior year my dad gave me a car for graduation, which made me very popular. It was a business coupe; I had a space in the back behind the front seats but no seats. I was a jobbing musician at the time and we would get three guys in that little space – three guys in the front seat and we would open up the trunk and three guys would sit in there with their feet hanging out and we'd drive to jobs.

We had a string bass, which was metal, that we borrowed from the school and we would put it on the roof. I would hang on to it with one hand and somebody else would open up the window and hang on with the other hand. We'd drive to gigs that way.

RICHARDS: How much did you get for a gig?

LASKEY: Oh $2 or $3 back in those days. It didn't pay very much. Gas was 25 cents a gallon. We would drive to the station and we would have maybe 15 or 20 cents between us. The station attendant would say, "Do you want quantity or quality?" You know, ethyl or regular. We'd always say "quantity."

RICHARDS: So it didn't cost much to get a gallon or two.

LASKEY: No. You couldn't drive very fast to these jobs in Chicago or else you'd get arrested. So, you didn't use much gas.

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RICHARDS: Was this after you graduated from high school? You said you were a jobbing musician.

LASKEY: I joined the musicians' union when I was a sophomore in high school, probably when I was 15. ... I always wanted to play an instrument. Before the Depression and before my folks lost their jobs, I started playing trumpet but my facial structure is not good for playing brass instruments. So I switched to saxophone. I remember playing it out the window.

I took piano lessons and I can remember getting up in an assembly in school on a dare and playing a piano piece. But I didn't follow up on that very much.

RICHARDS: Where you the first one in your family to be interested in music like this?

LASKEY: My mother, played piano, and I'm sure she played piano when she was pregnant with me. I have kind of a relative pitch on piano. I can tell you which notes are played. So I must have absorbed that through her stomach.

RICHARDS: So you were working, making quarters, money here and there. Did you keep on doing that when you joined the service?

LASKEY: I had hoped to get in a band when I was in the Air Force. I was in basic training in Atlantic City. One day I got a call from Captain Miller's office. I don't know if it was Glen Miller or not, I didn't ask. Because I had my musical experience on my record they wanted to audition me and I was all set to go that afternoon. But the next day at 2 in the morning they shipped us out to Camp Crowder to go to radio school. So I became a radio operator. As a musician I was very good with rhythms so I was able to develop a Morse Code speed of 45 words a minute.

They sent me from Camp Crowder to New York City where we lived in the Hotel New Yorker. We were part of a network to protect New York City from bombing. They would give radar readings over the telephone and in case the telephone wires went out we were backup radios. But at night, when you know they would do the bombing, the radio frequencies they gave us never worked. It was a really wasteful job but it was great being in New York City. We lived on three floors of the hotel. The big bands would come down there and I would go down and watch them. You didn't have to buy drinks or anything; it was great. You could get a ticket for anything, any restaurant, any movie, any play just by going to 99 Park Ave. where they had the serviceman thing. You'd get a free ticket for anything.

Former Crystal Lake Mayor Arlene Fetzner (second from left) presents a $700 check to Heraldry Guard Booster Club president Ethel Nemetz to defray the expenses of a trip to St. Petersburg, Fla. In the late '70s. Also pictured , from left, is high school senior Jeff Rhodes, Bill Laskey and co-director Dale Lonis.

RICHARDS:. Do you remember the names of any of the bands?

LASKEY: Benny Goodman I saw, and Artie Shaw. A couple others, as well; I think Vaughn Monroe.

RICHARDS: What year was this?

LASKEY: I went in the day after Christmas '41. I was drafted. I was in New York City for a year., then I was transferred to an Army group on Long Island that was going to Africa. I was a supernumerary, which means if someone got sick and couldn't go I would take their place. But it didn't happen.

I went back to New York City then and was transferred to another group, I've forgotten where. Ultimately I ended up in India in another wasteful job. It was called radio intelligence and we would monitor our own radio nets.

We were stationed on a fighter base doing this work. The fighter pilots would go over to Burma and do bombing because the Japanese were over there at that time. On the way home - we had straw roofed barracks and the officers' barracks were past us - they would fly low to take as much straw off the roofs as they could. We would just hit the floor.

I was in India about a year, in a little place called Gushkara – which isn't even on the map now. We came in to Bombay. It took us 45 days on the boat to get there because they had to zigzag because of the submarines. Since I was down in the fifth hold, where if the submarine did attack I had no chance of getting out, I would sleep on the deck a lot of times.

RICHARDS: How did it feel to be so intensely involved, at risk of being killed?

LASKEY: You just kind of put it out of your mind. We played poker all the way over. At one point I was about $1,500 in debt and they were talking about lining up to collect my paychecks. Then I got on a lucky streak and ended up $800 ahead. Then they decided to call the game off entirely. We landed in Bombay.

RICHARDS: It sounds like you were doing pretty well.

LASKEY: It was very hot in India and I have sensitive skin so I was one mass of prickly heat most of the summer. But in the winter it would get to be 90 in the day and in the night maybe down to the 40s so it was cool for sleeping. We had to sleep under mosquito nets all the time. One time I left a piece of chocolate on top of my mosquito net and I woke up to find a rat dancing around there trying to get at the chocolate. You were deadly afraid of the snake called the krait which tended to crawl into your shoes for the warmth. So every morning everybody's banging on their shoes to get the possible snakes out of there because if one of them bit you, you had about 30 seconds to live.

RICHARDS: So how long where you in the service?

LASKEY: I got out in 1945. We were waiting to go home but they had a certain sequence, amount of years you had in, that you went home. They flew us to Manila, which was interesting, too. Manila had been bombed a lot and you could still smell the dead flesh, which was kind of horrible. But we had the best food that we ever had because they were trading all the Army supplies for food.

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We had sweet corn and steak and stuff like that which we never had in the regular mess.

RICHARDS: That's probably not what you ate in India, right?

LASKEY: Occasionally we would get ice cream because the pilots would fly up to 30,000 or 40,000 feet to freeze it. Then they'd bring it down and a truck would come around and we'd all have our mess kits out.

RICHARDS: Did you ever go up in those planes just for a joy ride?

LASKEY: No. I never did. But I sat in one and when I went in they told me I could qualify for flight school, but I was hoping to get into a band so I turned them down. But that's what got me into flying eventually.

RICHARDS: How many years later did you get your pilot's license.

LASKEY: I got it when I was 80 years old and I leased a hanger at Galt Airport for 20 years. I don't know what I was thinking: That I was going to fly until I was 100 years old? The airport went bankrupt and under law a new owner is not responsible for agreements with the old owner, so I had to give up the hangar with about eight years left on the lease.

RICHARDS: Did you give up flying at that time?

LASKEY: Yes, and I'm glad I did with the advent of drones. They are in the hands of a bunch of dumbbells who are going to violate the rules. They're not supposed to fly over 400 feet and they found one up at 30,000 feet. It's just like texting while driving and talking on your cell phone while driving. Even though they're not supposed to do it I see millions of people doing it all the time.

RICHARDS: So the last time you flew how old were you?

LASKEY: I was about 84 or 85. I had a real nice plane, a tail dragger. Tail dragging is the only way to fly. It's real flying. It's very difficult. I had to get a rating and I got the rating through the generosity of a couple people at Galt, one of whom was a United Airlines pilot who had been an aerobatic pilot and had won the national championship in aerobatics. His plane is in the Smithsonian now.

He was very nice to teach me and didn't charge me very much. Another guy just loaned me the use of his plane so I could learn to do it. Pilots are very friendly; they're a great bunch of people. I'm glad I got into flying for that reason, but I never felt really comfortable flying. You're always looking for a landing space in case of emergency. That kind of made me nervous but I got to do it. I'm glad I did it and I'm glad I'm out of it.

RICHARDS: How did you get into education?

LASKEY: I enrolled at the Chicago Conservatory of Music when I got out of the service. I met a great teacher there who became my mentor. He was a clarinet player and I was a clarinet player and I was probably his best student. He wanted to be a symphony player and he left and at the time he left I was a sophomore, but he got me a job teaching woodwinds at the Conservatory. He also taught me how to repair instruments and gave me his job at Kagan & Gaines Musical Instrument on Wabash Street. I learned how to repair instruments which was very handy for a band director. I also played in a band – I don't know if you know the name – Bill Russo – a very important person who led an experimental jazz group.

I was always interested in jazz but I was also interested in classical. My first degree was in clarinet performance. I auditioned for the Chicago Civic Symphony which is a training symphony. I figured all the people there that would audition me would be clarinet players so I didn't bring my music; I had it memorized. Of course they didn't have a piece of music to look at. That didn't get me the gig.

By that time I had already gotten interested in playing jazz. I got involved in the Bill Russo band, which was great, and as a result of that Charley Ventura – a name you probably don't know, but he had a big name as a sax player and had this little group which consisted of Jackie Crane and Roy Kral. Jackie was a singer, Frank Rosolino was a trombone player and Charley Ventura was a tenor sax player. But he'd also had a big band.

RICHARDS: In Chicago?

LASKEY: No. No. He'd had it all over. But he had a gig for a week at the Regal Theater. So he came into town and needed musicians so he came to Bill Russo so we all filled in with his big band at the Regal Theater which was a really nice experience. There was one guy that was not in the Russo band. He was just recruited and he was African-American. And every day at the show the emcee would introduce both the black guy and myself as both having been born in Mississippi. And we're both Chicago born and raised. So we both had to stand up and the audience would applaud.

I also got a nice job because of the Russo gig. Claude Thornhill was in town for a couple weeks. He played a lot of things with high clarinets and I was a good clarinet player so I got that job substituting for a couple weeks at the Edgewater Beach. They wanted me to go on the road with them but I was working for my degree at the time and teaching and I didn't want to give that up so I told them I couldn't go.

RICHARDS: What where they paying you for these gigs at that time?

LASKEY: The pay was $150 a week. There's certain scale according to where you play in Chicago. Sometimes you might get $15 an hour. If you played a gig in downtown area, though, that was special price. You'd get $25 to $30 an hour. That was a good gig. I met Jerry Mulligan, an arranger for the Claude Thornhill Band. I became interested in what's called cool jazz as espoused by Lenny Tristano and Lee Konitz. It's sort of relaxed, cool sounds. I actually went to New York City to study briefly with Tristano and Konitz. Lenny had me play and he said he thought I could be a really good jazz musician. But what's the sense? Too much competition and too few jobs actually playing jazz. Most jazz gigs I've played have been very disappointing.

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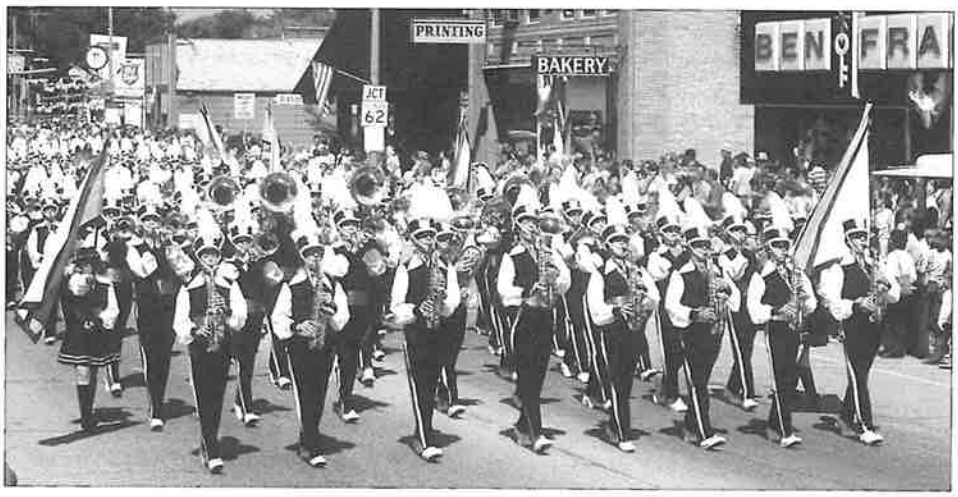

The Marching Tiger Band performs in downtown Algonquin, about 1976.

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RICHARDS: It sounds like that might have been boring for you, too. You liked to spread yourself way out there.

LASKEY: Oh, yeah. Well then I heard Charlie Parker. You know who he is. I saw him six times and I got caught up in his music. So I became a bebopper.

RICHARDS: I bet that was fun.

LASKEY: Oh yeah. I still am. I've made a couple of CD's and I'm in the process of making a third one: Reminiscences. … I'm using standards, like, one of the world's greatest jazz tunes is "All the Things You Are" by Cole Porter. It's a great jazz tune. Tunes like that, and then I want to get one of Charlie Parker's, one of Dizzy Gillespie's and one of Thelonious Monk. He played some very unusual music. Made the cover of "Time" magazine and his wife, Ruby, called him Melodious Thunk. (laughs) … He wrote some very unusual music. He came up with the two guys who were responsible for bebop: Dizzy and Charlie Parker.

RICHARDS: Where are you recording?

LASKEY: In my room. I've got really great recording equipment there.

RICHARDS: Talk about your involvement in school District 155. How did it happen that you started working there?

LASKEY: I taught in downstate Rossville for nine years, a small school of 200 people. You had to use both grade school and high school kids in the band. One year six of the first six trumpet players went out for football. Trumpets play the melody in marching bands, so I gave all the clarinets melody and converted the French horn players to trumpet players.

It was always hard to get people. I was tired of scuffling that way. I had a lot of interest and one year we won the sweepstakes award in our class for the most points in band performance and solo and ensemble performance. You could send 16 ensembles and a lot of soloists. It was comparable to winning a state trophy in athletics.

RICHARDS: Then you decided that you would like to look for another place to work?

LASKEY: I had a connection with the University of Illinois – I got my master's degree there in music education (first degree in clarinet performance) – and they have a placement service. They would send me openings and I heard about Crystal Lake and McHenry about the same time. The superintendents at that time were brothers so I interviewed for the McHenry job first. Then I interviewed for the Crystal Lake job. It looked better than the McHenry job so I took it. I felt like I could have had the McHenry job, too but they never came back to me. Cary-Grove had just opened up. I had to teach at both high schools my first year which was double everything: Double football games, double basketball games just drove me crazy.

RICHARDS: What year was this?

LASKEY: I think 1962 or 1963. I went to the superintendent, who was a real good ol' boy, and told him I couldn't do this anymore. He said, "What am I going to do?" Well, I happened to have a guy teaching trumpet for me privately by the name of Don Ehrensperger and I said I have just the guy for you. He had graduated from Northwestern looking for a band director's job. So they interviewed him and liked him and he stayed there for the next 30 years. So I just had the one high school and I chose Crystal Lake Central. All the kids at Cary-Grove were very nice and they gave me a nice saxophone case with a plaque that says "From the Cary-Grove Band Members."

RICHARDS: What kind of duties did you take on at Crystal Lake?

LASKEY: I had the three bands, Beginning, Intermediate and Symphonic; the orchestra and, music theory and music appreciation classes. I also had the marching band with a lot of extra duties.

RICHARDS: The Marching Tigers and the Heraldry Guard came after that. How many years after you started there?

LASKEY: The last 10 years of my teaching I got interested in drum corps. It's an interesting story. I was out practicing; I used to practice during band period with the marching band because the marching band was the symphonic band. I saw this little girl standing, leaning against the goal posts. Afterwards she talked to me and said she would like to join the band as a color guard instructor. I didn't have a color guard at the time but I thought maybe that it would be good to start one. She got me interested in going to color guard contests, which were fabulous because they're very militaristic and I learned how to march in the Army. I taught marching the way that I learned.

Cindy Anderson, I think she was a junior in high school, got me interested in the color guard contests and then the drum corps. I loved the drum corps because they were so precise.

I was putting on a band show every week. I knew it was sloppy and I knew it was bad. I just had a week's rehearsal. Drum corps work forever on their shows. I got interested in drum corps marching, which is heel to toe – kind of like Indian style. Pointed toes just jars your players. With a smoother style of marching they can play much better.

I converted the band to a drum corps style, we called it the Marching Tiger Band. That went on for about six or seven years until they decided to split the schools into Crystal Lake Central and South. I knew that would kill my band program, so I had to figure out a way to combine the two bands. Finally, I thought about the Swiss Guards for the Pope and I went to New Glarus (Wis.) to see. I thought we'd have these big Alpenhorns and we'd put them on rollers so the kids could march with them.

I had a Swiss Guard uniform made up by a company, but the stripes were all loose and I thought that's not going to work. So I gave up on that idea and then I searched around. Meanwhile they had made a Heraldry tiger and we had sold jackets with that emblem on it. One of the art students, Andrea Andreas, had done that for me.

RICHARDS: So you had this tiger designed?

LASKEY: Yes. Then I got this idea of a Heraldry Guard, with capes and hats with plumes and the kind of leggings that looked like boots and black shoes and black trousers. I also happened upon Joan Hooker who was a fantastic seamstress who I knew because my oldest daughter had gone to one of her sewing classes and had gone downstate to the fair with that. She made flags and we got some long trumpets to hang the flags from, so we were ready to roll. We combined the two bands and marched as the Heraldry Guard. It was fantastic.

In order to fund it we would sell six semi-truckloads of Texas ruby red grapefruit and oranges every year and we would set up an assembly line and make and sell in one day 14,000 hoagie sandwiches. We had competed against the Dundee Scots for many years and they sold hoagie sandwiches. They gave us the recipe, which was very generous of them. Then we had a guy by the name of Ray Visk who we called Colonel Hoagie and he got us all the best meats, the best cheeses. We got a slicer to slice the meat. Basically it's red onions soaked in olive oil overnight with oregano and then provolone, prosciutto, salami and tomatoes.

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RICHARDS: Tell me a little about the contests you were in and the awards you won.

LASKEY: We did "Jesus Christ Superstar" in '78 and '79 won everything with it. We won all of the field performances in a six-state area for the two years and all of the parade performances. We went to Traverse City, Mich. and the buses would like up and each of the bus drivers as they passes the judges' stand would snap the doors open and salute. They got first prize.

RICHARDS: You achieved top 10 national ranking?

LASKEY: We went to the Marching Bands of America, which was a national competition at Whitewater, Wis., and finished fourth. The color guard, directed by Cindy Anderson, won first place but she told them don't celebrate too much because the other kids aren't too happy about finishing fourth. Interesting story about her. She told me later that she had come into the band as a mole, trying to recruit people for the drum corps she belonged to. She had marched with the Cavaliers and later instructed with them. I said that's OK, as long as you stayed and did what you did for us. She also brought us in a great drum instructor, Jim Campbell, who is now head of percussion studies at the University of Kentucky and was just inducted into the Drum Corps Hall of Fame.

RICHARDS: How did the Heraldry Guard end or did you just retire?

LASKEY: I just retired in 1980 and Jim Campbell said, "Bill will retire and it will just stumble along a couple years and then just go down the spout."

RICHARDS: Is that what happened?

LASKEY: Yes. I had a student teacher, Dale Lonis who came in and was a very big help in doing the Heraldry Guard, in forming it. I should give him credit here. He was looking for a job and there was an opening at South High School, so we went to the school board and said we would like to have Dale get that job. They were giggling, knowing that they had to do it, what with a 400-member band parents organization behind us.

RICHARDS: I notice you say "we" a lot.

LASKEY: It was a group effort. I had a great president of the band organization, Chuck Hoffman and his wife, who just did immensely wonderful things; then Joan Hooker and the band parents in general. They loved to follow the band. The jocks, of course, hated it. The stadium would fill up for the football game and after halftime show it would empty out.

RICHARDS: What did you do next?

LASKEY: I worked for John Landon at his music store in downtown Crystal Lake repairing instruments one day a week.

RICHARDS: How old where you then?

LASKEY: I was 56. I took early retirement because I could see there were certain animosities developing between the kids from South and Crystal Lake Central. I could see that there was not going to be much future in it. And we couldn't compete at a lot of competitions because we were two schools.

RICHARDS: Tell me a little bit about your family?

LASKEY: My wife, Joanne (Weed), was a musician. She played the clarinet and saxophone. She taught at the Conservatory, too.

RICHARDS: Was that where you met her?

LASKEY: Yes. Actually my mentor, Leon Kniaz introduced us. He has us over to play trios, of which I still have a recording somewhere.

I was 28 when we got married. Jan. 5, 1950. It was a very wonderful relationship. She gave up everything. She taught for a while in Rossville, at the grade school, but it was a terrible job. They had split classes so she started out teaching with a class of 45 eighth-graders. They didn't believe in passing kids on so she had some kids were 18 years old and kind of rowdy.

RICHARDS: This was a match made in heaven.

LASKEY: Oh, yes. We both played in the Danville Municipal Band for a number of years. That was a wonderful experience. Met a lot of great people; got some good playing jobs out of that, too.

RICHARDS: And you started a family after you were married.

LASKEY: We waited 12 years. My wife, at first, said she didn't want children. We had our firstborn, Elizabeth, followed by John, Mary and James. We didn't find out until about six weeks after James was born that he had Down Syndrome. We didn't know what to do. Fortunately they had the age 0-3 program at Pioneer Center at the time. Joanne would go there and take James and they would teach him things that we didn't know he could be taught. We eventually ended up getting this award from Pioneer Center as a Trailblazer. ...We later got him into the special education district where he was educated and learned to read. We benefited greatly from all those programs.

RICHARDS: He's really been kind of like a joy to you, hasn't he?

LASKEY: Yes. We had his name on the list for group homes for 10 years and he finally got in at Marengo when he was in his early 20s. It's a nice house. They have eight clients. He works in the Pioneer Center workshop and comes home here very two weeks on the Pace bus and goes back on the bus.

He's a big sports nut and fluent in the NFL and college football. He knows where all of the pro players went to college. He's a Cubs fan. I was born and raised on the South Side into a White Sox family and I've always been a White Sox fan.

LASKEY: My wife passed away from stomach cancer in 1995. I lost my mother to cancer and my sister to cancer. My wife and I always said about Betty Jean Stoltze next door: Some smart man ought to snap her up. So me, being a smart man, did just that.

I bought two stars for the roof of Raue Center for the Performing Arts and when Betty Jean and I go there we pick them out and say that's Joanne and her mom. Betty Jean's mother, Alma, was quite a character.

I have a poem in a card which affected me more than the many others that I got. It's from "The Little Prince" by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who was a pilot in World War II.

RICHARDS: "... In one of the stars I shall be living. In one of them I shall be laughing. And so it will be, as if all the stars were laughing when you look at the sky at night." – The Little Prince.

RICHARDS: It must have been a wonderful thing to find somebody who brought spark back into your life.

LASKEY: Yes, it was. My kids have known Betty Jean all their lives and they love her. She's a wonderful person, such an optimist. She's never happier than when she's doing something for somebody, so as a retired RN she was in the right profession.

... I've had many, many wonderful women in my life. My mother (Gertrude Greenock), my grandmother, maternal grandmother, several aunts, some teachers, my wife, Betty Jean, my sister. I'm probably the luckiest man in the world.

Century old farm looks to make history

By RON PETERSON

It is clear the Peterson family is rooted in tradition. The Peterson farm in Woodstock has applied to the Illinois Department of Agriculture to join 29 other existing "centennial farms" from McHenry County.

The story begins with Swedish immigrant Alfred Peterson. The tailor, whose resume included a suit for the king Charles XIV John of Sweden, arrived at Ellis Island around 1893.

Alfred Peterson

When his attempt at earning a living as a tailor failed, Alfred switched to farming. He met his future wife, Bessie Nelson, in LaSalle County and they married on May 28, 1898, in the city of LaSalle. They had nine children, five girls and four boys, born in Tonica (near Ottawa) and a son born in Sandwich.

Alfred owned a farm near Sandwich in Kendall County, but in 1914 it was severely damaged by a tornado. Undeterred his search for a new farm led him to the 190-acre Orson and Emma Brass farm in McHenry County. The transaction between the Petersons and the current property owner, August Naslund of DeKalb, took place on Feb. 16, 1916. The Petersons moved that spring to the farm, located at 2903 Vermont Road in Woodstock.

Descendants believe cattle were moved by rail to Union and then herded to the new farm. The Peterson family, which then consisted of Alfred and wife, Bessie, with their children Signe, Florence, Albert, Clarence, Helen, Hazel, Chester, Carl and Wesley started a new life in McHenry County. Agnes, the eldest daughter, would stay and live with Aunt Carrie in Granville, Ill.

The children started their education by attending the Brass School, located only a few steps away at the corner of Vermont and Secor roads in Seneca Township. The older boys were hired to make sure there was wood to burn in the stove. In 1917 a new school building was built on site and called the Vermont Road School. During the years 1930-1945 Albert and Clarence Peterson, Henry Secor and P.W. Andrews served on the District 106 school board.

Alfred started with a herd of dairy cows. He also raised horses, which he used in the fields and to pull wagons. The main barn had been built in 1902 by Orson Brass. Brass had been a McHenry County horse dealer, which is why there was a second smaller barn.

The next seven years would prove difficult for the family. Alfred became ill with a lung-related disease around 1917 and spent time in a Waukegan sanitarium. Unable to work the farm, Alfred turned over the reigns to his eldest sons in 1920. He died in a Cook County hospital on Feb. 23, 1923, at age 54.

Fortunately, Albert and Clarence received help managing the farm from the Harry Carlson next door. Agnes Peterson, while working at a lumber mill in Granville, sent money home to help pay the bills. Signe Peterson had married Bill Remus on the Peterson farm in 1920. Signe then moved to a farm on Collins Road a couple miles away. Florence Peterson, working in Woodstock as a housekeeper, married William Polnow in 1924 and the couple began farming land off Route 176 in Marengo.

Sometime in the 1920s, Albert started working at Todd School in Woodstock. The school became a focal point for the family. Albert's future wife, Helen Miller, worked there. Clarence also married a woman, Anna Horn, who was living and working there. Helen, Hazel, Wesley and Minnie Sipsma Peterson also worked there at one time or another.

By 1930 Hazel was working as a nursing instructor in Rockford and the following year – on June 17, 1931 – she wed Emil Guse in a double-ring ceremony at the farm. Clarence and Anna also married that day.

The Guses settled down in Union and Emil continued working at Schurtleff & Co. In 1948 he bought the company and changed its name to Guse Feed & Coal. Clarence and Anna lived with Bessie until March 1932. They then moved to the Lloyd farm at the corner of Vermont and Collins roads. Their first child, Gerald, was born that summer. Years later they settled on a farm off Route 176 near Marengo.

In September 1933, Helen married Bill Schwake and they moved to Elgin. In June 1935, Albert married Helen Miller and lived on her family's farm, located where the McHenry County Government Center is located. The couple eventually bought a farm next to the Peterson homestead on Secor Road.

For the next few years, Chester, Carl and Weley worked and lived on the family homestead. They raised dairy cattle, hogs, horses and sheep. But in 1939 Carl and Wesley married and moved out. That left Chester to run the farm with Bessie.

During the mid-'40s the family would gather each August for a big picnic to celebrate Bessie's birthday. Food was placed on a hay wagon and people would sit beneath trees on the front lawn, swapping stories and perhaps play a pick-up game of baseball. Starting in the late 1920s and early 1930s the Peterson boys played baseball on a team in Union. It was their passion and outlet after working on the farm all day.

Chester turned to relatives and hired help to keep the farm going, including "fresh-air" boys who came out during the summer from Chicago youth homes. Chester and Carl shared farming equipment the rest of their lives. A John Deere model B, bought in 1946, launched a long line of Deere equipment used on the farm. Chester favored the line, with the exception of a Massey-Ferguson bucket tractor he loved.

Chester also bought a milk truck and started his own route in 1942.

(Continued on page 8)

Signe strikes a pose with her father, Alfred Peterson.

(Continued from page 7)

In fall 1948 a fire started near the kitchen and damaged the rear of the house. No one was injured, but the house had to be remodeled. Alfred and Bessie converted two bedrooms into a big kitchen with an adjoining bathroom. The stone foundation and dirt floor in the basement also was converted to cement at that time.

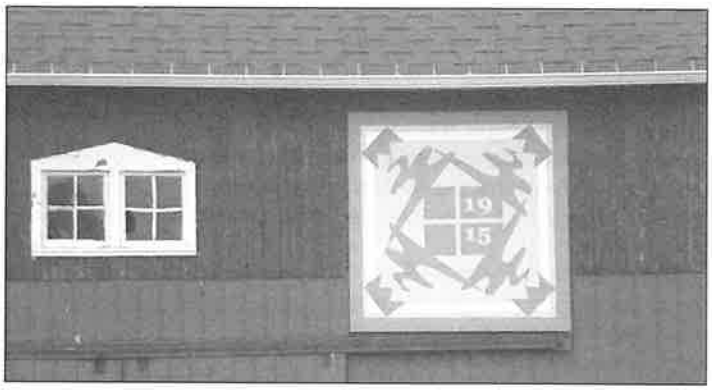
Changes came in 1953. Chester had back issues that would not let him continue dairy farming, so he sold off the herd and launched a beef operation. Chester also married June Busch on Aug. 15, 1953. Bessie by then had moved off the farm to live with Carl Peterson for a time, and then with Florence Polnow. The farm added 85 acres by the time Bessie died on Dec. 7, 1959.

The farm withstood fires and floods through the years but Chester kept it running. One of the most trying times was in the spring 1969. One morning while he was burning a pile of brush in the orchard, Chester's pants caught fire. He had second- and third-degree burns and was unable to do any field work. The neighboring farmers got together one weekend to do most of the field work and Carl Peterson, as time allowed, planted his crops. The sons would do all the farm chores and go to school.

Fire also damaged his favorite Massey Ferguson tractor in 1977. Occasionally floods would damage low-lying crops and the family would have to bring cattle back to the barn are for safety.

When Chester realized he could no longer run the farm himself, he rented out part of the land and his sons ran the rest of the farm. The hogs had been sold off by 1977 and the remaining cattle in 1994.

Over the years the family grew corn, soybeans, oats, wheat, alfalfa, hay and pumpkins as cash crops. Chester died on the farm he loved on Jan. 15, 2007. His widow, June, and their sons kept the farm running to the present day. Currently, the 275-acre farm grows corn, soybeans and wheat.



This blue and yellow "Swedish Farm centennial barn quilt adorns the barn at 2903 Vermont Road in Woodstock.

New to the Library

- First Congregational Church, Huntley, 1864 to 2014, 150th celebration, Sept. 1, 2014 DVD.
- Cary Grade School Book Records, Teachers' Daily Register – 1884-1886. Also includes Cary Centennial Celebration, Northwest Herald, July 6, 1993.
- Hestia's House. Memoir includes growing up in the Woodstock Children's Home. Blaine Paxton Hall. Hazelhurst House, Pinehurst, NC, 2003.
- Stand Silent. United States Military History. Howard Peterson. Vantage Press, New York. 1975.
- Course of Study for the Common Schools of Illinois, 7th revision. Parker Publishing Co., Taylorville, IL. 1925.
- Nunda Weekly Advertiser – Nov. 17, 1875-July 23, 1880; Nunda Herald – Aug. 13, 1880-May 12, 1882; Seneca Herald – Feb. 2, 1880 – Feb. 16, 1880.
- Nunda Herald – May 19, 1882-July 25, 1884.
- Abstract of Title: James Mullen, village of Huntley, Grafton Township.
- Abstract of Title: Alvin Judd, city of Woodstock, Dorr Township.
- Northwest Herald/Pediment Publishing – McHenry County Memories, The Early Years: 1800-1939. Northwest Herald. 2014.
- Blanche Shales, Various junior/senior subject notebooks and papers from Woodstock. 1930s.
- Scrapbook: WLS (World's Largest Store) Radio. News clippings.
- Rural youth photos and news articles beginning in the 1940s.

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Memories from the Rudolph Exhibit

"Each Christmas I loved reading my little Golden Book "Rudolph" as a child in the 1970s. I still have it."

– Mary Ott, LCrystal Lake

"I got my first Rudolph book in a Montgomery Ward store in Lake Geneva, Wis. in the 1940s."

- Henry Kenyon, McHenry

"When Gene Autrey came to visit us pre-flight students in Santa Anna, Calif. In 1943, he sang "Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer" – much to our amazement and pleasure!"

- Buck Hilbert, Union

"When I was younger with blond hair I looked like Hermie!"

- Rick Goldschmidt, Oak Lawn

"My family watches the movie. We have ornaments of every character and when they show up on screen for the first time in the movie, the person with that ornament hangs it on our special Rudolph-only tree."

- Rick, Laura, Craig, Kalie, Kara and Meighan Butler, Crystal Lake

"I grew up watching Rudolph. Thanks so much for sharing your knowledge and collection with us!"

- Laura Davis, Elgin

Dave Harrms and Lynne Eltrevoog outdid themselves compiling the 2014 Rudolph display.

From our archives

BY KIRA HALVEY

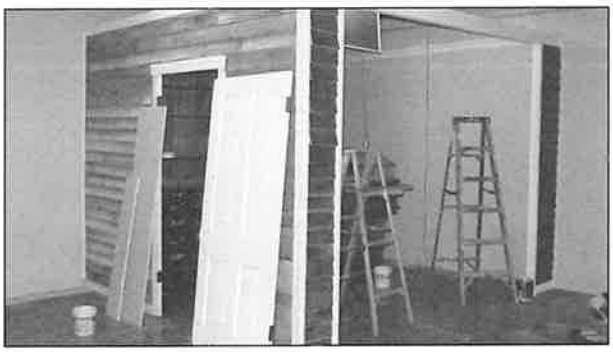
This building, built in 1838, was originally built about where McHenry's Veterans Park is located. For a short time before Woodstock became the county seat, the building served as the county's first courthouse. Once the county seat was relocated to Woodstock (Centerville) in 1844, the building was moved to its present location. Horace Long, the new owner, remodeled the building into a hotel in the 1860s and called it the "Mansion House."

The most well-known owner of the McHenry House was Jacob C. Bickler. Jacob Bickler's 1944 obituary states that "For 30 years, he was the owner of the McHenry House, one of the finest hotels in this vicinity." From this, it is believed that Jacob took ownership of the building about 1911-1913.

Prior to 1920, the McHenry House was a major outlet for the wares of the McHenry Brewery located just west on Pearl Street. Note the sign on the building advertising McHenry Brewery beer. In this photo, the man in the leather apron on the McHenry Brewing Company truck is Peter Worts. At one time Peter Worts won a $5 bet by picking up a half barrel of beer, placing it on his shoulders and walking eastward across the bridge to the other side with it.

J.C. Bickler's McHenry House, circa 1913.

It is probable that the bar at the McHenry House continued to serve liquor throughout the 1920s based on the fact that Jacob Bickler was arrested for Prohibition violations by federal officials Sept. 3, 1927, along with numerous other individuals. The charges against Bicker were later nulle processed after the prosecution case was tainted by the disappearance of Alford Pouse, the McHenry County State's Attorney. Bickler retired from managing the McHenry House in 1939. The building still functions as a tavern under the name of the Town Club.



The second floor of the museum is undergoing massive changes, including creating space for textile storage (right) and creating new tavern-themed exhibit space (left). Special thanks to volunteers Bill Dysart, Al Bird, Bob Lee, Gary Anderson and Bob Frenz.

Memories of circus experience recall simpler time

Among the treasured memories of a long-gone rural America is that of the circus coming to town. Just imagine for a moment how captivating the sounds and smells and sights those circus parades made coming through your hometown.

There was no doubt that the exotic possibilities circuses offered eclipsed the routine of everyday life. As author Janet M. Davis described in her book, "The Circus Age – Culture and Society Under the American Big Top," the circus was an international multiracial "traveling town."

Lester D. Bacon

News clippings in the McHenry County Historical Society Museum's library date the arrival of circuses in the county to 1856. Try to picture in your mind's eye the Yankee Robinson Quadrangle Show, when it arrived that year in Woodstock for two Wednesday performances with 100 men and horses. Ten years later, arriving as the Yankee Robinson Circus, four separate shows took place in four separate tents. They advertised living animals and museum curiosities; Negro minstrels; the Creole lady, a trapeze artist; plus, Dilly Fay, the Shanghai clown, with trained elephants.

The circus parade through town must have been stunning.

On Nov. 5, 1925, the Daniels Medicine Show with 44 members performed in little Solon Mills for the start of a nine-day run. Imagine that!

Several other circus references in the library help detail this aspect of history that developed somewhat as a by-product of railroad expansion, plus a late 19th- and early 20th- century change compared to an older provincial way to life – described by Davis as a "world nation."

By 1903, according to Davis, 98 circuses and menageries traveled the nation. At least 38 rambled by rail and several journeyed from coast to coast in a single season. One such circus, with a direct connection to our county, was the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus – which typically enough combined two different shows through merger and purchase. In 1907 Benjamin E. Wallace, a Peru, Indiana livery stable owner and circus owner of the Great Wallace Circus, bought the Carl Hagenbeck Circus. The Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus eventually ceased operations in 1938. But for about two years in the early 1920s, it included two young men from McHenry who performed in a side-show act of their own creation.

Lester Roger Bacon, a rifle instructor stationed at Ft. Benjamin Harrison during World War I, and his good friend Walt Freund grew up together on McHenry's Main Street. They joined the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus sometime after Lester's discharge from the army on Jan. 27, 1919. Both were in their early 20s at the time.

While both men died many years ago, Bacon's son, Lester Duane Bacon., shared some stories about his dad, his father's circus connections and life in a much earlier McHenry. As the younger Bacon, now 83, said in his interview: He knew lots of kids his age whose fathers served in World War I but no one else had a dad who actually joined a circus. That's a pretty cool memory to have.

– Nancy J. Fike

Interview conducted Sept. 18, 2014, by Nancy J. Fike with Lester D. Bacon at his home on Greendale Court in McHenry.

My grandfather William Bacon grew up on a farm just west of Grayslake – now developed. Back in the 1800s, though, my great-grandfather raised bulls for transport to the western part of the United States. [The idea was] to make better beef cattle out of herds out there but he also, I think, sent bulls to France, England and Australia.

One day my grandfather was in Wauconda where he met a lady he liked so much that he married her, around 1893 or 1894. My grandmother was Zena Mae Potter. Her parents owned a lumberyard in Wauconda

I have a picture taken of them at the Chicago World Fair in 1894 and she was dressed in her Indian dress. She was part Potawatomi.Her mother was Caucasian but her father was Potawatomi. That is probably the reason my great-grandfather disowned him. At my great-grandfather's death he deeded his property to the other sons.

My grandparents came to McHenry after his father "threw them out of the house." William started to dig wells for a living and started Bacon Well Drillers sometime in the 1920s. My father was born in 1897, the third of 15 children.

For a short time the family lived in a building on the southwest corner of Elm Street and Riverside Drive, since burned down. They lived in an upstairs apartment. There is a story about them getting a cast-iron stove upstairs and it was a four- man job. They started up with 4 people but the stove kept tipping over so grandpa wrapped his arms around it , walked upstairs and sat it inside – a very strong man. Later, they moved to 3707 Main St. where my grandparents lived for the rest of their lives.

My father, Lester Roger Bacon, and mother, Eva Georgine Adams, married in Woodstock on Sept. 18, 1930. My father was the third child born to my grandparents.

My parents rented a house at 3616 Maple St. where we lived until I was about 5 years old. At that time we moved to 3706 John St. where I lived until I enlisted in the Marine Corps at age 18 after high school. I went to Korea in 1950 and stayed in the Marine Corps as a reserve until I retired in 1990 as a colonel.

I became a civil engineer, working construction and maintenance for the Illinois Department of Transportation. I worked 31 years for the state.

Grandmother wrote to dad in 1921 or '22 and said 'Come home. Grandpa can't do the business anymore.' My father took over the well business because my grandfather was unable to find his way home one day – dementia.

At the time my father was sent for by my grandmother, he was in a circus in a sideshow act with Walt Freund. My father and Walt were very good friends. They went to school together. They were "diaper buddies." They lived two blocks apart on Main Street. Walt Freund was close to the same age as my father. Walt told me stuff about my dad because he wouldn't talk about himself. I think the last Freund in that generation just died.

Walt was young when he had some sort of injury that left him blind. Maybe a firecracker exploded or something else happened.

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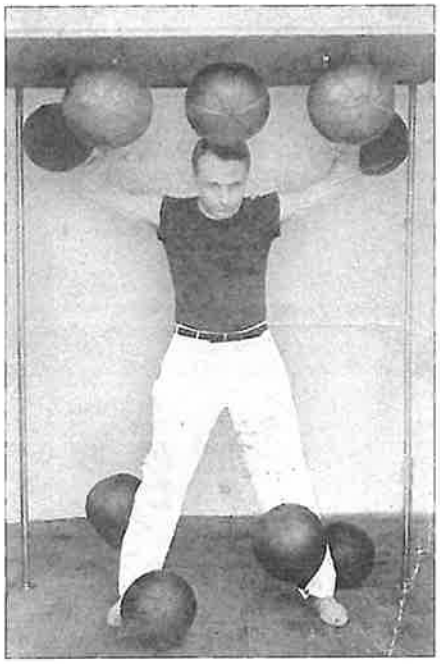
My father worked for grandpa drilling wells by driving a horse in a circle driving the well point which was raised and lowered into the dirt down to the point where you could get water back out. He could sometimes make a little side money.

Walt didn't have that ability but he "punched bags." The two of them punched bags at the back of his father's business at 3931 Main St. where Walt Freund's tire dealership was. Walt grew up there.

My father had money enough to send for a bag punching kit. Both boys were very interested in boxing and in the news that you got from the boxer magazines and news stories, boxing was very popular around the turn of the 20th century. Dad erected this punching bag on Walt's back porch so it hung underneath the deck at the back of the building. They punched bags all the time which pretty much kept them out of trouble up to 1920.

My father joined the Army along with his oldest brother, Guy, who trained to be a pilot in World War I. Dad went into the service and became a sharpshooter and a shooting instructor at Ft. Benjamin Harrison. He served stateside. Because he did such a good job he was promoted to Sergeant before his discharge on Jan. 27, 1919.

It was after that military service that he joined a circus. I really don't know why he and Walt joined a circus but at the end of the 19th century people were still driving to the western U.S. in wagon. Railroads still were relatively new. It seemed, though, that many, many people had a desire for adventure, especially at the ages of my father and Walt. The circus came along and supplied the opportunity for great adventure. All I know is that they got a job as a sideshow act, not a big top act.



Walter J. Freund – alias "Jack Shadow"

My dad and Walt's act at the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus sideshow involved racks that they attached punching bags to so they could strike them with the forehead, elbows, fists, hips, knees; every body part. Walt Freund was capable of striking 11 bags and keeping them in motion. My father could do nine.

Walt told me that if the circus boxer couldn't go on, maybe he was drunk or injured in some way, dad was his backup.

They were gone for about two years, traveling from from San Diego, Calif. to Maine. Walt told me a story about getting into an East Coast place, probably New Jersey. It was a big field and there was a big tavern on one side of the field. After they got the tents up, they went down to the tavern to get themselves a little libation. When they got there they found themselves unwelcomed by most of the other customers there because they were from the circus.

That was a bad thing – unless you wanted to go to the circus and see it.

The crowd became upset. Walt told me that when the fighting broke out, he and my dad would get the lights shut off by throwing things at the lights and knocking them down. With the lights out, Walt could still hear pretty good and would slaughter them on one side and my dad, who was shorter than most but hit hard, would knock the crap out of the rest.

By the way, I didn't dare say that at home or my mother would have beaten me up!

When my grandfather became unable to do the business work anymore grandma had to send for help. Dad never had any regrets about being in a circus.

He and Walt Freund originally joined the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. When dad quit, Walt also quit because he couldn't see. When they were together Walt had his hand on my dad's shoulder. That's how they got around.

I did go to the circus once with my father. It was in Woodstock. (I had just returned home from the service where I spent 13 to 14 months in Inchon, Korea.) We parked the car and as we walked toward the sound of the circus calliope there was a circus barker with the sideshow tents set up. He was giving his spiel, enticing people to go see the tattooed person or whatever.

As my dad heard the music and started out I could see his back become straight. He seemed just thrilled to be there. When he got close enough, he said: "By God! That's the barker who was at my sideshow." He stayed outside with the barker while we went inside the tent. It was just amazing to me and the family to see this connection.

My father really didn't talk about others that he worked with at the circus. Not everybody stayed with the same circus all the time. I do remember my dad asking the

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Parade at 12 o'clock, noon. Band Concert at 7 p. m.
PERFORMANCE AT NIGHT ONLY
Doors open at 7:30 p. m. Performance at 8:00 p. m.

General Admission 35c. Children Under Ten 25c.
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barker in Woodstock about somebody he knew but that individual was no longer with the circus. I don't remember going to the circus myself as a kid but I probably just don't remember. I was really a proud kid. There was nobody I knew who had a parent who had worked in a circus for two years. I knew lots of folks whose fathers went off to serve in World War I but not any who had been in a circus sideshow.

Several years after dad left the circus, he and my mother were married. My mom was 20 and he was about 31 or 32 years – 13 years older.

(Continued on page 12)

(Continued from page 11)

There are two sides of my family – the Bacons and the Adams. On the Adams' side were my grandfather, Lester, and his son Lester Virgil. Pollyanna was my grandmother. I also remember a shadowy figure always dressed in black in a rocking chair in the house. Grandpa Adams had tried farming in Wisconsin but lost the farm so he came down to McHenry and opened a laundry. When I was in the sixth grade, I went to work for him hanging clothes outside.

Because he had been burned out in the first effort (no insurance) in 1927, grandpa went to Mr. Carey at the West McHenry State Bank. It was the only bank in town at that time. Mr. Carey said, "I can't loan you any money. You don't have any collateral."

Several years later Gerald Carey said to him: "Lester, you came to me awhile ago and asked for a loan. Whatever happened to that?"

My grandfather said, "Well, you wouldn't loan me the money so I borrowed it from Household Finance." Carey said, "That cost you twice as much for the money. Grandpa Adams replied, "That's a damn site better than what you offered!"

The first laundry was in a building that was at the northwest junction of Routes 31 and 120. On the left is the old Admiral building. That laundry site burned down. All the commercial equipment burned, too.

Then he operated out of a house that was directly across Route 120 from Buss Ford when they operated there (3925 W. Elm St). My grandfather's property included an old two-storey frame building that sat to the rear of the property (former clover dryer). He turned that clover dryer into two apartments, one of which was once occupied by the Chuck Miller family.

There was a barn behind that I had to prove that I could set fire to, so I did. I stuck my foot through the loft floor trying to put the fire out. My sister was with me and she ran down stairs yelling, "Mama come! Mama come!" Everybody came running out.

This was on a Sunday and I used to go to the movies on Sundays, since it only cost a nickel or dime. But not that Sunday!

When I was growing up, as long as you didn't do damage, you could do just about anything you wanted to. I used to lay out on the roof extension over what was a porch.

We moved from Maple Street over by Woodland Cemetery when I was about 5 (1936). This house was at 3706 John St., directly in back of my grandmother's place. Our neighbors to the east didn't like that we had dogs so they killed them by poisoning.

My father became a state police officer in the early 1930s. At the time my folks married, dad had a business in the building on the northwest corner of Front and Main streets. In the early 1930s, or perhaps the late 1920s, my father had a bowling alley upstairs. It was a time, during the Depression, when anyone who came in to bowl wanted to bowl for money. You had to compete. If you didn't you were out of business.

After my parents married, my mother would brew beer (Prohibition times) and store it under the bed. Sometimes it would explode. … It was that kind of a world. Mom made homebrew and wine out of anything she could find.

Three months after I was born in 1931, dad was appointed to the state police and stayed an officer until 1943. That was a political appointment. Still is. Rep. Thomas Bolger got him the job.

Dad was a sergeant on the force. He was a motorcycle cop and had his leg broken at a gravel intersection where he took a spill. The accident occurred about midnight and at dawn a farmer came by in a pickup and took him to the hospital in Woodstock.

The doctor said, "Les, I am going to have to cut that leg off." My father said, "Doc, if you do, I'll shoot you!" That was in 1932 or 33.

He told the doctor to call his captain and the doctor was told there'd be an ambulance and state trooper there in 15 to 20 minutes. He was to prepare my dad for a trip to the hospital in Elgin. They got a bone expert out of Chicago. They had to open his leg from knee to ankle in order to pin the bones back together because they kept sliding past each other. My father was a patient for 13 months. To pass the time dad whittled. He whittled me a wooden rifle and gotten some inner tube rubber from Walt Freund from old tires.

I had this beautiful all-wood rifle which had a trigger and would shoot a rubber band.

Our neighbor at that time was a very large lady. She often came to have coffee with my mother. One time as she walked by, the temptation was just too great. I couldn't miss. She stopped, looked back and went out the back of the house. Nobody ever used the front entrance – none of your friends, anyway.

About 5 minutes later my mother said: "Give me that rifle!" She took it out and smashed it against the tree until there was nothing left. My dad wouldn't make me a new one either!

My mother was the disciplinarian in our house. She spanked me a lot, she really did. About every six weeks she just had to get it out of her system. My sister caught it, too.

My father was not the disciplinarian. He hit me twice and I have vivid memories of both. One day when I was in high school and my sister was just being antagonistic and ornery, I hollered at her to "shut up!" We had a long narrow kitchen and I back peddled up to the other end which was about 15 feet and sat down. My father had hit me! On one other occasion he used the leather thong on the end of his [police] billy club. I got that for smashing one of our neighbor's headlights on his car parked out on the street. It was on a dare.

It happened to be the [Methodist] preacher's car and he was watching. Dad had to go over and give him enough money to repair the damage. He took me over to apologize but that was after he laid the leather loop on my bare butt. I don't think that it did a great deal of physical damage but it sure shocked the heck out of me. My younger brother who was into everything, too.

During World War II, mom built a chicken coop in the back yard so we had fresh eggs all the time and fresh chickens. My brother would go upstairs with a 22 [caliber] rifle and shoot the rats that came out to eat the chicken food. During the war a lot of city ordinances went by the wayside. You won't find anybody shooting 22s in town today!

This 1948 image depicts leaders of the March of Dimes Polio Fund drive, possibly at the Benton Street Restaurant at 120 N. Benton St. in Woodstock. Among those pictured are Chevy dealer J.L. Townsend (far right).

Next Mystery Photo: Name the town where this depot is located.

The Harmony Linen: County history reassembled

BY KURT BEGALKA

Most everyone has found an important paper in the attic, garage or basement, but since we are unsure what to do with it we put it back.

The McHenry County Division of Transportation fortunately resisted that temptation.

In going through old files for Harmony Road, located in the southwest portion of the county, staff found something that looked like it was written on a piece of parchment dating to the early 1900s. It turned out this 28-by-19-inch document actually was made from Irish linen. Such cloth, coated in thin layers of wax, preserves ink.

A simple drawing shows dimensions and references to nearby properties. At the bottom is county clerk's signature – dated July 20, 1939 – along with the faint remnants of the clerk's seal. In the middle of the document are a series of certifications dating back to 1847. Even staff who had worked at DOT for 30 years, never saw anything to compare with the "Harmony Linen."

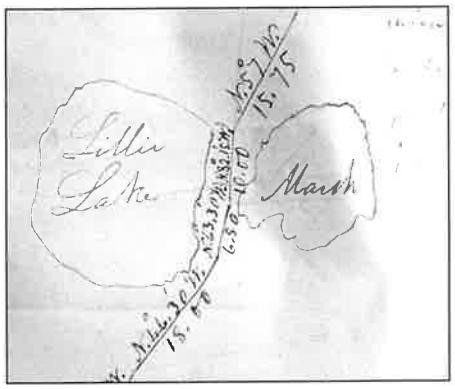
Project/Design Engineer Ernest Varga likened it and the 302 other similar documents tracked down in far-flung corners of the county to the Rosetta Stone. Even the simplest drawings are valuable tools, conveying everything from the location of mills, ferries and old Indian trails, to soil types and the configuration of original creek beds. Marengo bears its original name of "Pleasant Grove." There also are references to "Paradise Prairie" and "German Prairie."

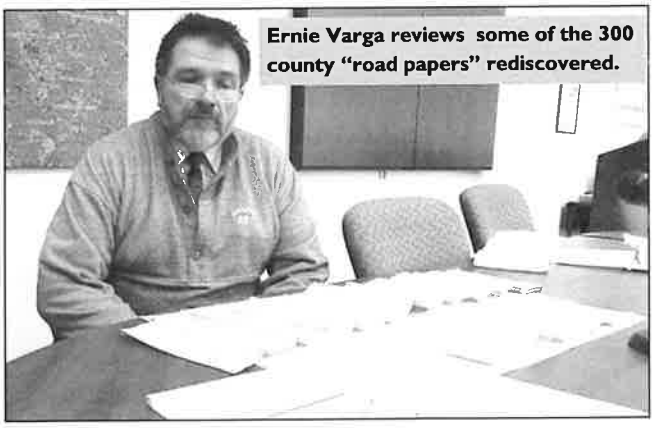
"They are all really unique in their own way," Varga said.

It was hoped that the linen would shed some light on how our roads originally were conceived. The first hidden message it found was written in pencil; odd for a document not intended for preserving the lead in pencils (now graphite). Handwritten in the top left corner was: "*See Road Paper No. 7 Co. Clerks office.*"

Initially the clerks' staff was just as baffled – until former County Clerk Katherine Schultz recognized the county clerk's signature and seal from 1939 validating the document as authentic. Schultz recalled that there had been a "blue ballot" in 1964, when Illinois voters approved separating the offices of circuit clerk and county recorder from the county clerk. That required divvying up the files and sending them off to the proper new departments.

The circuit clerk's office maintains a database of more than seven million documents which have been scanned and are available free to attorneys of record, online and to the public in viewing rooms at the county courthouse. Circuit Clerk Katherine Keefe ran a complete search of her office's records and found nothing referring to "road papers" or any other reference found on the Harmony Linen.




Ernie Varga reviews some of the 300 county "road papers" rediscovered.

The county recorder's office, which records, maintains, and preserves all land records for the county, had better luck. Phyllis K. Walters, the first recorder in Illinois to have all recordings dating back to 1839 imaged, indexed, and digitized, concluded that there were a number of similarities in graphic representation between the linen and original blueprint dedications of road rights-of-way records (from the early 1900s) recently retrieved by her office from the county archives.

These records once were housed by the county surveyor. But that position was eliminated in the 1950s. Would it be possible to research a department that no longer existed? And in 1972 when the courthouse moved from its location on the Woodstock Square to its current Route 47 campus, were more of these files taken directly to archives?

Originally located at the former county poor farm, established in 1884, the archives moved into the former Valley Hi Nursing Home in 2007 when a new facility opened next door. In 2011 the records moved again – this time to an estimated 15,000-square-foot dedicated storage facility off Nelson Road. It contains more than 18,000 boxes of documents.

Archives Records Manager Bill Draths was tasked with finding a proverbial needle in a haystack with one scant clue: The handwritten "Road Paper File No. 7." Not only did Draths discover it amid the circuit clerks' documents, he found the original bids, proposals and specifications submitted for the 1856 courthouse addition, documents referencing the first county board minutes and the 1877 agreement outlining the purchase of land for the county jail.

Ironically, Draths discovered Road Paper No. 7 had been checked to the DOT since the 1930s. He also unearthed 302 other papers – all handwritten with quill and ink on thick parchment. Pages that needed to be kept together were sealed with wax or glued with cloth to act as today's staples or clips.

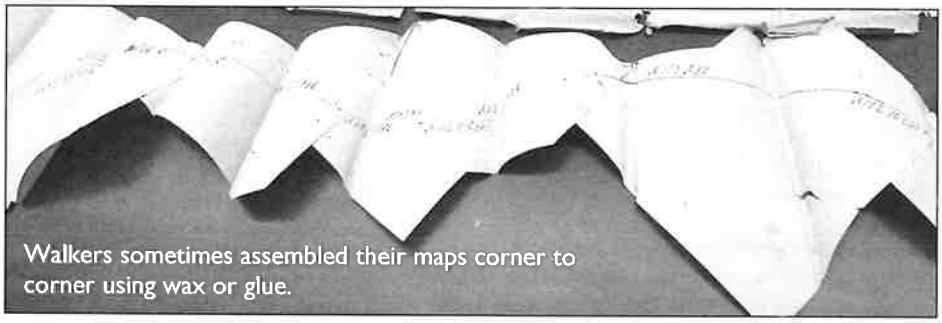
"We're very lucky to have them," Draths said. "A lot of things disappear by entropy. By luck, certain things survive."

Research by the county state's attorney's office into the 1847 road laws uncovered how roads came to be. To construct a road today, plans are put out for bid for a contractor to build. But during the 19th century, each able-bodied male resident between ages 18 and 50 from the township where the road was to be built, was required to provide three days of labor. Each brought saws and axes to remove vegetation and shovels to dig a ditch along the road. The material dug out for the ditch was then placed in the middle to build up the road. When ruts developed, men of the township would be called upon again to help keep the roads in a good state of repair.

(Continued on page 14)

(Continued from page 13)

The Harmony Linen is an account of the location of a portion of Harmony Road, as verified by "Road Viewers" from the 1800s and then certified by the County Clerk in 1939, likely to settle a dispute. Back then it often began with local citizens filing a petition with signatures with the County Court of Commissioners (today's McHenry County Board) along with a bond (payment) to show they were serious in their request for a road. Payments are not part of the process today.



Walkers sometimes assembled their maps corner to corner using wax or glue.

A notice, posted to the courthouse door, would announce when a public meeting would be held. It gave people an opportunity to speak for or against the proposed road. Keep in mind at this time there were few roads and everyone wanted one to be able to get their crops to market.

It's hard having a team of horses pull a wagon through fields in the fall after harvest and after a hard rain.

If the Court of Commissioners agreed further study was warranted, "viewers" were assigned to view the area for a proposed road recording field conditions to see if the land is viable for a road. These 304 "Road Papers" tell the story for many county roads and it is interesting to see what the "viewers" noted on their field visits, as well as how some roads never made it through the process and were rejected.

"Three viewers would walk the line and determine the route," Varga said. "They would denote prairies, Indian trails. Some were Rembrandts in their own way."

Today surveyors collect field data, geotechnical engineers sample the soil and subsurface conditions, and civil engineers that compile all the information and begin to design the road. There even is a process whereby payment is made to a landowner for damages incurred to be able to construct the road.

The Harmony Linen was a joint effort in 1939 to settle a land dispute accomplished through the county surveyor, clerk and state's attorney's offices. Today, bringing a road project from beginning to end remains a collective effort – involving planning, design, construction and maintenance. And this "living document" continues to be a treasure trove.

The Illinois State Archives picked up the road papers in November. They will flatten and repair each map – many of them spanning several sheets of paper, attached accordion-style. They will keep a negative of the microfilm in Springfield for permanent preservation, and send a positive copy to the regional archives at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb for general research. The scanned images, as well as the originals and a copy of the microfilm, will be returned.

The estimated eight-month process, will yield a searchable, digital map accessible to the general public.

"Our belief is that there is much more information in the ethereal world of history," Varga said. "It's really cool to preserve this stuff."

• *Bill Draths, Katherine Keefe, Katherine Schultz, Heather Spenard, Ernest Varga, Christina Webb and Jeffrey Young contributed to this article.*

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